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ABSTRACT

The potential for role strain is much greater in single-parent families where one person functions as both caretaker and provider than in the two-parent household where these roles can be shared. Role strain affects the quality of relationships and the interactions between parent and child(ren). It was hypothesized that the role strain felt by single adults with children would be expressed in greater frequency of negative interaction or contact between adult and child. Observations were made of 238 cases of either a single adult with children or a couple with children in locations such as laundromats, stores, churches, parks, and restaurants. Neither the number of adults nor the sex of the single adult was related to the frequency of interaction or contact. The child's behavior was related to both the frequency and the mood of interaction and contact. Findings did not support the idea that role strain of single parents affect parent-child interaction, suggesting that single-parent families may be neither better nor worse than two-parent families, at least in terms of parent-child interaction. (Author)

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INTERACTION AND ROLE STRAIN: ONE-PARENT VERSUS TWO-PARENT SITUATIONS*

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INTERACTION AND ROLE STRAIN:

ONE-PARENT VERSUS TWO-PARENT SITUATIONS

The traditional family structure, as characterized by the nuclear family unit, is undergoing significant changes as the number of single-parent households, once considered a rarity, increases in sizeable proportions. It has been estimated that more than half of all children born today will spend some time in a single-parent family. Such a transition in family composition would appear to necessitate a reconceptualization of parental roles and a thorough examination of the effects of single parenting. Most of the literature on single parent families focuses on the effect of the situation on the children involved. The emphasis is on the children; relatively little attention is paid to the effect that single-parent situations have on the parents or on parent-child interaction.

Research has indicated that, even in a traditional two-parent situation, parenthood itself causes stress to parents and is perceived as a "crisis" (Le Masters, 1957; Dyer, 1963). A single-parent situation would, presumably, cause even greater stress; a single parent carries all of the responsibilities of parenthood plus the responsibilities of head of household.

In his theory of role strain, Goode (1960) discusses the strain in attempting to fulfill two equally demanding roles. The potential for role strain is much greater in single-parent families where one person functions as both caretaker and provider, than in the two-parent household where these roles can be shared. This possible role strain would inevitably affect parent-child interaction: interaction between the single parent and the child(ren) may be adversely affected by tensions

and anxiety which may result from role overload on the lone parent.

Single parents also may experience initial stress from the lack of role clarity in a couple-oriented society where a one-parent household is considered the exception. Due to the assumed atypical nature of the single-parent role, institutionalization of the single-parent family is virtually nonexistent in our society (Mendes, 1976). The lack of an institutionalized role set explains the absence of support mechanisms which would tend to reduce the psychological and physical strain (Ross, 1975). While some of our most inbred social attitudes concerning single parenting are undergoing change, the prevailing attitude is to quesiton permanent cultural provision for something that is "unnatural" or "undesirable".

While the factors culminating in single parenthood remain important variables, it is the role itself which is likely to create role strain. Some people can deal with strain more successfully than others. How many, however, can cope with continued stress over long periods of time without significant help? Such help is not readily available to the single parent who is striving to make his or her role system manageable. This involves careful allocation of time and energy. Role bargaining, the selection among alternate role behaviors through which the individual attempts to reduce strain, is difficult for the parent who must be both bread winner and bread maker. Reduction of the single parent's work load to bearable proportions is a challenging task: he or she must reduce tasks performed or reduce the adequacy of task

performance. Both choices involve significant sacrifices for parent and child (Glaser and Navarre, 1974).

The role of single parent is complicated by the fact that single parents tend to "over parent" in an attempt to compensate the child for the missing parent (Weiss, 1975). Prior disturbances within the home and the circumstances surrounding the separation function as variables in the quality of home life before and after the transition. The father's previous interaction with the child and the type of relationship the mother had with them before the separation occurred are important in determining how well the single-parent household will operate (Klein, 1973). Fathers often have a limited knowledge of normal child development and of the logistics of homemaking. On the other hand, mothers might not have previously had to cope with the pressures of full-time employment combined with the demands of homemaking. Children must now relate to a parent who is undergoing drastic changes and role adjustments. In many instances, over parenting is the unconscious outcome of guilt feelings on the part of the parent who feels that they have failed themselves and their children in not living up to society's ideal type. Aggravation and tolerance levels fall off with sudden breaks of anger, panic, and remorse. Communication between parent and child can become distorted due to unrealistic expectations and the defects that stem from loss of a parent and, consequently, of a sex role model. Both parties can become caught up in an "aggravation cycle" that is detrimental to the family (Weiss, 1975).

In a home where one parent is absent, there is less of a division

between the single parent and the children. As Weiss (1979) points out, the outcome can be both positive and negative. The children may feel more a part of things with a cooperative spirit developing. The single parent can find it extremely difficult and emotionally unrewarding to spend most of his or her time relating to children. With only one parental energy source to supply the emotional, physical, and moral needs of a child, intrinsic gratifications are at a minimum. Parents themselves are experiencing deprivation and emotional frustration.

The key to a positive view of single parenthood is the single parent's commitment to the child(ren). Studies reveal that single parents are very commited to their children, who take the highest priority in their lives (Glaser and Navarre, 1974). Such commitment, however, can isolate the parent even more in a attempt to give the child most of his or her time and energy leaving less opportunity for personal fulfillment. Failure to live up to personal standards of a good parent is more devastating for the single parent whose self expectations are not always attainable.

How adequately an individual is able to parent successfully under the pressures of role strain unique to the single parent is debatable. Role strain certainly affects the quality of relationships and the interaction between parent and child(ren). The more stress, frustration, anxiety, and tension that are present, the more strained the relationships and the poorer the quality of interaction among family members.

Since there have been no empirical studies of role strain among

single parents, this study attempted to explore the phenomenon. It was decided to do unobtrusive observations of adults with children, though this presents the limitations of not knowing if the adults who are alone with children are, in fact, single parents, or if they are parents of the children at all.

Even so, the situation presents the potential for role strain as a person is caring for children while engaged in another activity; this is the type of situation usually facing single parents. Therefore, it was decided to observe situations of single adults with children and couples with children to note if interaction or contact occurred between adult and child and if this interaction or contact appeared to be positive or negative. It would be assumed that the single adults would experience more role strain as they care for children and engage in another activity, while two adults could share the role responsibilities therefore, it is expected that the role strain felt by single adults with children would be expressed in greater frequency of negative interaction or contact between adult and child.

METHOD

Twenty students in a sociology of the family class acted as observers. The observers unobtrusively monitiored the behavior of adults with children at specific locations. The locations selected included a laundromat, a grocery store, a shopping center, a department store,

a church, a park, a restaurant, an office building, and a recreation center.

Observation forms which allowed for a quick check-off of variables were prepared. Observers completed a few trial runs with the forms until they were familiar with the use of the forms.

Forms were completed for the situations in which one adult or one couple were with one or more children. Situational variables which were noted included location, age and sex of child(ren), behavior of child(ren), and age of adult(s). Age was estimated by the observer. The observer also noted if there was any verbal interaction or physical contact between parent and child, and whether the interaction or contact appeared positive or negative.

The effect of the situational variables on the interaction and contact was analyzed, as well as the mood of the interaction. Cross-tabulation and multiple regression were used to analyze the data. While multiple regression was designed for interval-level variables, it may be used even if the data satisfy only the assumption of ordinal-level measurement (Labovitz, 1970).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of the 238 observations which were done, 66% took place in an indoor location. In 13% of the observations, the children were with a male adult, they were with a female adult in 51% of the cases, and

they were with both a male and female in 36% of the observations. The age range of the adults was from 20 to 62, with the median and modal category being 30. There was one child present in 55% of the observations, two children in 36%, and three children in 21%; 58% of the children were male. The age range of the children was from 1 - 19, with a median being 6. The child was participating in the adult's activity in 41% of the cases, while the child's behavior was distracting in 25% and unrelated in 34%. Parent-child interaction occurred in 73% of the cases, and contact occurred in 52%. The interaction or contact appeared to be positive in 72% of the cases.

There is essentially no difference in frequency of interaction in situations where there is one adult and situations where there are two adults. When there was one adult present, interaction occurred 85.5% of the time, and interaction occurred in 82.1% of the situations with two adults. In those situations where there are two adults, it might be expected that there would be greater frequency of interaction simply because there are two adults who can interact with the child(ren); but the other adult also provides a target for interaction, and adult-adult interaction might occur.

When single adult situations are broken down by sex, there is no difference between males and females in frequency of interaction with children. There was interaction between adult and child in 86.2% of the cases with an adult male and in 85.3% of the cases with an adult female.

Again, with contact there are no significant differences between

one-adult and two-adult situations in frequency of contact. Contact occurred 60.3% of the time with one adult present and 64.3% of the time with two adults present. And examination of single-adult situations reveals no significant differences between males and females in frequency of contact with children. There was contact between adult and child in 62.1% of the cases with a male adult and in 59.8% of the cases with a female adult.

Examining the behavior of the child yielded some relationships. If the child's behavior is unrelated to the adult activity, there is significantly less interaction or contact. Interaction between adult and child occurred in 91% of the cases in which the child was participating in the activity of the adult and in 97.9% of the cases in which the child's behavior was distracting to the adult, but in only 66.7% of the cases in which the child's behavior was unrelated to the activity of the adult. There was contact between adult and child in 66.7% of the cases in which the child was participating in the activity of the adult and in 68.1% of the cases in which the child's behavior was distracting to the adult, but in only 50.8% of the cases in which the child's behavior was unrelated to the activity of the adult. For example, if the child is playing quietly while the adult is doing the laundry, interaction or contact is less likely than if the child is helping with the laundry or crying.

Though interaction or contact is no more likely to occur if the child's behavior is distracting, the interaction or contact that does

occur is much more likely to be negative. The interaction and contact were judged to be negative in only 13.5% of the cases in which the child was participating in the activity of the adult and 18.0% of the cases in which the child's behavior was unrelated to the adult activity, but in 72.2% of the cases in which the child's behavior was distracting. Distracting behavior generally creates role strain as the adult(s) must deal with the child(ren) while the adult is engaged in a different activity; the role strain generates more negative interaction or contact.

When interaction was regressed on several situational variables, there were no signigicant relationships (see Table 1). However, when

- - Table 1 about here - -

contact was regressed on the situational variables, two of these variables exhibited significant relationships with contact (see Table 2). The number

- - Table 2 about here - -

of children was positively related to contact; this seems logical--when there are more children, there is a greater chance that at least one of them will have some contact with the adult(s). Age of the child was negatively related to contact: the older the child, the less likely contact is. This also seems logical, as younger children are more likely to be holding the hand of an adult, and older children are more likely to be at a greater distance from the adult(s), so that contact is not possible. Older children themselves are perhaps less likely to want contact as they consider themselves increasingly independent and do not want to have their hands held or their heads patted.

When positive interaction/contact was regressed on the situational variables, two significant relationships occurred (see Table 3). Both

- - Table 3 about here - -

an outdoor location and the child being female were positively related to positive interaction and contact. In an outdoor location, adults are probably not as concerned about controlling the child's behavior and so the interaction or contact that does occur can be more relaxed and positive. The fact that positive interaction or contact is related to the child being female might be due to sex-role stereotypes in our society. According to the stereotypes, female children are less disruptive, and so interaction with adults might tend to be positive.

CONCLUSIONS

Number of adults present was not related to the frequency of interaction or contact with children or the quality of that interaction. Of the variables examined, the one which has the strongest impact on interaction, contact and the quality of interaction was the behavior of the child. This helps keep in mind that interaction is something between two (or more) people, and not something that is done to one person by another. The child in the situation is a person in a relationship and his or her behavior affects the relationship.

Sex of the single adult was not related to the frequency or quality of interaction or contact with the child(ren) present. If this finding holds up in further research, this supports the trend toward awarding child

custody on some basis other than sex of the parent. Though there has been a stereotyped assumption in American culture that women are "natural" parents, the finding of no difference in interaction perhaps indicates that parenting abilities are related to a quality other than sex of the parent.

Along with not knowing if these adults are single parents or parents at all, this study has the limitation of observing only one brief segment of the time spent together by the adult and child. If the adults are not single parents, it does seem that role strain could be generated by having to care for the children while engaged in another activity. But it would be far easier to deal with the situation for an hour or two at a time than to face the situation twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, for an indefinite period of time. The potential for role strain is continuously present for single parenthood.

However, if this finding of no difference in interaction continues to hold for single parents, perhaps we can begin to revise our view of single-parent families as "defective". Single parent families are perhaps neither better nor worse than two-parent families, at least in terms of parent-child interaction.

Table 1. Regressing Interaction on Situational Variables

Variable	B	Beta	F
Time of day	.0460	.0902	1.097
Outdoor location	.0463	.0855	.918
Rainy Weather	.0811	.1009	1.365
Two Adults Present	-.0307	-.0537	.389
Age of Adult (A)	.0027	.0688	.378
Number of Children	.0306	.1108	1.620
Female Child(ren)	-.0632	-.1180	1.842
Age of Child(ren)	-.0012	-.0199	.032

r^2 = .0686 df = 8,133

Table 2. Regressing Contact on Situational Variables

Variables	B	Beta	F
Time of Day	-.1274	-.1404	2.844
Outdoor Location	.0029	.0029	.001
Rainy Weather	-.1292	-.0904	1.171
Two Adults Present	.1063	.1046	1.580
Age of Adult(s)	-.0064	-.0931	.740
Number of Children	.0919	.1874	4.953*
Female Child(ren)	-.0591	-.0621	.546
Age of Child(ren)	-.0237	-.2206	4.208*

r^2 = .1288 df = 8,133

Table 3. Regression Positive Interaction/Contact on Situational Variables

Variables	B	Beta	F
Time of Day	.1301	.1484	2.994
Outdoor Location	.1660	.1785	4.035*
Rainy Weather	.1346	.0974	1.282
Two Adults Present	.0757	.0771	.809
Age of Adult(s)	.0095	.1433	1.652
Number of Children	-.0345	-.0727	.704
Female Child(ren)	.1429	.1553	3.215*
Age of Child(ren)	-.0101	-.0978	.781

$r^2 = .0762$ df = 8,133

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